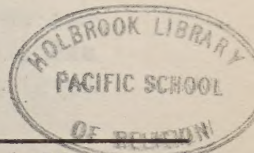


"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A Church Program for the Rural Community

By Shirley E. Greene*

Please notice that my subject is not "A Program for the Rural Church" but "A Church Program for the Rural Community." This is significant. I should have said the same things anyhow, but it is comforting and helpful to have one's topic phrased to describe somewhat accurately what one is going to say. There is a great deal which needs to be said upon this subject. In order to leave plenty of time for discussion, I plan to present this paper more or less in the form of a series of paragraph headings or key sentences which your own thought, experience and subsequent discussion will fill in.

My first paragraph heading is this: The program of any social institution depends upon (a) its basic philosophy, (b) the extent of its resources, and (c) the quality of its leadership. Of course, many other factors are involved, but these are central and are those over which an institution may exercise some measure of control.

The present plight of the rural church may be seen to be the result of defects in relation to these three vital elements. With respect to its fundamental philosophy, the rural church has too long assumed that its purpose was to save souls as souls out of a sinful world. This process consisted in plucking individuals out of the community and setting them apart from the community as "a peculiar people." I know one minister of the gospel, for example, who prides himself on the fact that he hasn't voted in twenty years,--"Because politics is so dirty." Thus the church has abstracted the respectable and idealistic people from the community and left politics, recreation and other community functions in the hands of the other folks.

In the matter of economic resources, the rural church has also been faulty in its management. With resources already slender as a result of the disadvantaged position of agriculture in the national economy, the rural church has further divided and dissipated its possible resources by the folly of denominational fragmentation.

Regarding leadership, it is all too familiar a fact that the rural church has for decades steadily sacrificed its best leadership to the city church.

The results of these factors at work in the rural church have been to reduce the rural church to an inadequate witness both in terms of extent and quality, and to make it a marginal institution with waning influence. No longer is

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the church at the center of the social life of communities; it is rapidly slipping toward the edge of the community in terms of the interest, the loyalty and the support which it receives.

Having said so much in criticism of what seem to me to be defects in the present rural church philosophy and program, I wish now to propose a new philosophy and statesmanship for the rural church. These proposals are based on the experimentation which we have been carrying on at Merom Institute for the past four years. This is not to say that we have succeeded in doing all that I shall describe here, but we have discovered what seem to me to be valid lines of procedure in this field.

Our first task is to achieve recognition of the rural church as a community institution and as a community center. This is merely asking that we make our program as broad and as vital as our gospel. We have frequently said that Christianity is not just a theology but a way of life. We said that first as a protest against the abstraction of theology, but then we left the phrase "Christianity, a way of life" hanging in mid air until it became just as much of an abstraction as the theology which went before it. Well, Christianity is a way of life. The doctrine of the Kingdom of Heaven is a doctrine which is designed to permeate and transform every human relationship. If, then, our gospel is interested in every phase of human life, if every human problem is at bottom a moral and a spiritual problem, why then should not the church which is the representative of Christ on the earth be interested in every human problem and in every aspect of human life and relations?

Let me illustrate what I am proposing in terms of the great functions of community life. What are the things which communities seek to do for men and how is the church to be related to these functions?

Central to all human and social living is the function of worship, the cultivation of man's relationship to God. I do not need to spend time arguing or illustrating the fact that this is a responsibility of the church. This has long been recognized as the church's central task. I mention it, however, not simply for the sake of completeness, but also because I want to emphasize my conviction that this is central to all effective Christian action. Nothing else can take its place as a motivating center of human conduct. And I do think that the rural church can greatly improve its forms and services of worship at many points.

Another function of communities is education, passing on the heritage of the past and training the mind and the will of the new generation. I emphasize the training of the will and the affections. It is a great tragedy that education has been taken over so completely by the state and so thoroughly neglected by the church. The result has been a nation of keenly trained minds, but a nation without a correspondingly adequate discipline of the will, the loyalties and the motives of good living. Here is a continuing responsibility for the rural church which is located at the place where the high birth rates are producing the population of the future nation.

Recreation is another function which communities perform for their people. We are finding in America that we have increasing amounts of leisure time on our hands. We are also being told by the psychologists that the leisure hours are far more potent forces in character formation than the hours

of work. Character is produced when we are making voluntary choices, doing what we want to do, and enjoying ourselves. Yet the church has grossly neglected the whole field of recreation, so far as any constructive program is concerned. We have been content to condemn many current recreational forms, but we have not taken responsibility for replacing them. If we don't occupy the leisure hours of youth and adults, somebody else will.

"The body is the temple of the spirit." This is text enough to demonstrate the relationship of the church to community health. I have traveled about among the rural churches of my region and seen many evidences that the phrase "starvation in the midst of plenty" is not a description of city slums alone. For lack of information about diet, many a rural household is producing under-nourished and mal-nourished children. I know a community, for example, where many of the young people of my age are wearing false teeth today simply because they ate too much gravy and not enough spinach. Here is a task, and it is only one of many in the field of health, in which the church should have a concern, at least until public health agencies can be established to do the work.

The function of economic life and of work is, in many ways, the basic function of community life. Here also the church has its concern. We have very largely lost from American life the concept of the vocation or "calling," the sense that every man's work is a sacred calling in which he is to make a social contribution. This is only one of many unredeemed spots in our economic organization which clamor for the attention of a church dedicated to the principles of human love and brotherhood.

For the sake of completeness, one should also mention that secondary function of tying community life together which is called government, the social cement. Having just been through an election, perhaps all of you can illustrate from your own observations certain areas in the realm of politics which need the redeeming work of the Christian gospel as mediated by the rural church.

Now having documented our central thesis by reference to the major functions of community life, let us ask ourselves specifically what must the rural church do. First of all it must be a leaven in the doughy lump of community life. This is the place where the individualistic and the social work of the church come together. The church takes men from the community, regenerates them, gives them new motives, new ideals, new purposes and then sends them thus changed out into community life to permeate as a leaven all phases of the social order. Let me note the fact, however, that this does not happen except by conscious effort. If the religion of the church is wholly in terms of emotional stimulation, if it is shot through with the spirit of pessimism about the world, if it is oriented toward the world beyond the skies to the exclusion of concern for the redemption of the present social order, it will not be the leaven which our communities need. The gospel must be so interpreted and so applied that it will motivate men to change the evils of their community.

A second task of the rural church is to keep the moral traffic lights burning. The church should be a standard-setting and a criticizing agency in community life. This means more than simply going about condemning and fighting against moral evil. We have done a pretty good job of that.

We have not done nearly so well in the more important business of encouraging, supporting and sustaining every morally wholesome and uplifting activity in the community. Nor have we always been too successful at the business of moral discrimination. Take, for example, the attitude of the churches toward the movies. By and large the rural church has been content to condemn the movies. This hasn't stopped people from going to them. Eighty million people a week go to the movies which is a good deal more than come to our churches. Now I know that 85 per cent of the movies produced are not worth seeing and a great many ought not to be seen at all. On the other hand, there have been some very wonderful movies produced in the last few years. I have seen some movies which preached better sermons than any I have heard in pulpits,--my own included. If the church is not going to lose all moral influence in such realms as this, it is going to have to cease its wholesale denunciations and learn the art of moral discrimination. Condemn the bad movies if you like; but then organize a party with your young people to go to see a good one.

But now in terms of specific program, what may the church do? I have heard many academic debates on this question in seminary halls. When you get out in the field, however, you discover that men and women have a way of being born, living and dying, and you can't wait for an academic solution to this problem. You learn to go ahead on some working basis. My formula, flowing from the things I have been saying to you is this: The church may do anything which meets a real human need; and it must be ready to quit anything which it can find some other agency to do better. Both parts of this formula are important. Nothing is foreign to the nature and interest of the church which ministers to human need. Yet the church must not become so attached to any specific programs as to feel that its life depends upon them. When that happens, the church may easily become a barrier to the best sort of community development.

I can illustrate this formula by reference to the recreation program which we are carrying on at Merom. When I came to the community I found that no adequate recreational provision was being made for the older youth. They found themselves out of school with no chance for college and no jobs and lots of time on their hands. Well, they were doing--just what you would do. They were getting into trouble. Therefore, I as minister of the church took initiative in a program of recreation to meet this need. A little later it became possible for us to get a W.P.A. recreation project. They furnished leadership which could give more time and do a better job of recreation leadership than I could, so I turned this task over to them while I led the church on to other interests. But we did not abandon the recreation program. We are still deeply interested in it from the point of view which I have earlier expressed. We are interested to see that the moral standards are maintained at every point.

My last comment is also but the heading of a very large paragraph. To achieve the sort of community program for the rural church which I have been outlining, certain things will be absolutely essential. Among them will be inter-denominational cooperation, a better trained and a more stable leadership in the church.